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AUTHOR Geiger, Philip E.; And Others
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ABSTRACT

A pilot minicourse program was launched for elementary school children aged 8 to 13 years based on the assumption that children learn best when they can practice what they are being taught, and will show an increased interest in school work when they are given a role in the decision-making process. Students went through a "college style" registration four times per year, choosing approximately one-fourth of their school curriculum. Each minicourse was scheduled for a 9-week period, meeting from one to three times per week for an average of 45 minutes each. The school was divided into seven Individually Guided Education units (semi-autonomous teaching divisions of four teachers and approximately 100 students), and each unit had a different schedule and course offerings. Other practices instigated in the program involved the use of community teachers and a clear communication of course requirements and expectations. Major strengths and weaknesses of the program are discussed from the viewpoint of a special area teacher, a parent, and a classroom teacher. In general, the program has proven to be responsive to such concerns as: "forced" schooling and its disciplinary consequences, ability levels, scheduling disappointments, the increased responsibility inherent in the children's development of self-assessment and decision-making skills, and the interest and enthusiasm of all involved in the program. (CS)

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DECISION MAKING

AT AN EARLY AGE:

AN ELEMENTARY MINI COURSE PROGRAM

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By Philip E. Geiger
Kathi Heine
Phyllis Vall
Jacqueline Snyder

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Mr. Geiger is Assistant Principal at the Peter Muschal School in Bordentown Township and is a doctoral candidate in applied human development at Teachers College, Columbia University.

Mrs. Heine is a physical education teacher at Peter Muschal School.

Mrs. Hall is a parent of a fifth grade student and vice president of the PTA.

Mrs. Snyder is a third grade teacher at Peter Muschal School and she is pursuing a masters degree in guidance from Rider College in Trenton, New Jersey.

Decision Making At An Early Age:
An Elementary Mini Course Program.

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An Overview by the Administration

The value of mini courses is becoming generally accepted throughout the country. High schools are instituting partial programs or small scale experiments to permit greater freedom for the student. Relevancy in high school has long been sought after, and involvement in one's own curriculum is a start. It is ironic, however, how carefully we (educators) try to control the student's life while espousing theories of development that encourage experimentation with one's environment.

The question will eventually arise as to what is the right age at which a child can make a reasonable choice about his activities. Illich has attempted to remove "forced" schooling from the educational scene in his book, Deschooling Society, but where is the "in-between"? With the basic philosophy in mind that children learn best when they can practice what it is they are being taught, Bordentown Township launched a mini course program for children 8 years old up to 13. In the Peter Muschal School which houses only grades K-6, students go through "college style" registration four times per year choosing approximately one fourth of their school curriculum.

The idea developed as a result of a move to individualization. At the same time the school was working on mini courses, it was also making application to the State Department of Education to be included as one of the 60 IGE/MUS-E model schools in New Jersey. The administration as well as the special teachers were also anxious to let the kids have a say because they truly believed the "learn-try-relearn" teaching method was the best. At this point groups of people had to be considered for the implementation of such a program -- the kids, teachers, parents, special teachers, and the Board of Education. Each one had to be convinced that the idea was sound.

First and foremost, initially, was the special teacher -- art, music, physical education, and other specialists who were to be added. Peter Muschal School employs one full time art teacher, a full time vocal music teacher, a part time instrumental music teacher, and two

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full time physical education teachers for 720 students. With very little argument, they were sold. The teachers liked the idea of narrowing the range of material for their classes. Up to this point every child went through a generalized program at each grade level, a traditional approach to elementary special subjects. Each class is now arranged for a nine week period, meeting from one to three times per week for an average of 45 minutes each. A student can now choose between 3 and 5 selections for every area and he is no longer required to take every area, every quarter. These teachers were realistic, their vanity did not get in the way of realistic teaching methods.

We all realize that children, just like adults, have special interests and talents. So often we use the rationale that children should be exposed to a wide range of ideas but we don't know when to allow a child to decide some things for himself. The program was set up to make the choices from a prescribed framework. The teachers basically established a schedule and course listing which would make a well rounded program for the student while permitting the freedom we were looking for. They didn't have to tell the children to choose anything in particular, that was built into the system. But the program isn't foolproof (we'll get to the problems later on).

Discipline is another reason for the acceptance of the idea. Some children simply do not want to be in your class and will show you that by being a real pain in the neck. Our contention is, why should you and the kid suffer when you can live without each other for a quarter, or take a class that meets less frequently than another. Why should the child who is taking instrumental lessons and is seriously turned on to music be forced to take as much art, why not allow him to pursue a little extra music? How much leeway do the kids get? Instead of taking four quarters of every subject the student now can take three each year. Since some classes may meet only once or twice per week, he can also schedule himself for the hated subject once per week for a quarter while still fulfilling his quarterly requirement.

The addition of mini courses also permitted another new practice in the school, interest classes taught by community representatives. While in the process of creating mini courses, home economics for

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boys and girls was added and other courses such as woodworking and journalism are being considered.

It is truly a sight to behold when an 8 year old gathers together his booklet of course descriptions, schedule sheet, individual schedule card, and course history card. You wonder whether he realizes that he is becoming bureaucratized at an early age. Because the school is divided into 7 IGE units, semi-autonomous teaching units of four teachers and approximately 100 students, every unit has a different schedule and course offerings. The units also vary in age with some containing children ages 8-10 while another has only 11-13 year olds. Obviously the nature of the courses is different and there is a range of difficulty in choices. With the 13 year olds you need every level of subject matter, while at age 8 most kids are around the beginning stage in music appreciation, etc.

After reviewing the directions, the leader of the special unit of teachers permits the students to begin registration by age, rotating age groups every quarter. It's just like it was in college, line up and make a choice. Although the children are required to make a list of priorities before coming into the room, they must continually be weighing their decisions as classes are closed. Alternate choices are made, and courses that may not be first on the list are accepted ---the realization of life comes home very quickly and concretely during registration. This is one of the snags of the program. Our aim is to try to meet individual needs but that is not always a possibility. At this time we rationalize that what choices we are able to provide are more than the student had before. With the addition of extra staff and more part time personnel we could probably offer every student his priorities but this is unrealistic at this time.

The process itself, however, turns out to be a learning experience. Nowhere in most curriculums do we see students actually being taught how to make decisions. Regardless of what job one has in life or what his status or ambitions are, he will have to make decisions. The mini course program allows us to help guide the student in making a decision. Alternate plans, the acceptance of minor disappointments,

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establishing priorities, assessing one's own talents and interests, establishing some goals in life, all come into play because of the procedure that these kids must go through.

The Viewpoint of a Special Area Teacher

The special area teachers have all seen the improvements in their classes since the inception of mini courses. The students' responsibility, their improved behavior, and their understanding of the basic course requirements are evident.

One of the most favorable aspects of the program is the clear-cut comprehension of what the course is about, what is going to be done in the class, and what you are expected to do. Knowing the requirements for the course removes the fear from special area classes which is usually present because of the unknown. Students, as adults, are able to perform expected outcomes only when they know what these expected outcomes are.

Another favorable aspect of mini courses is that they provide each child with an individualized program in art, music and physical education. A student does not have to study two-dimensional design if his abilities are fully developed in this area. He has the opportunity to choose three-dimensional design, entering a class where the class will fulfill his needs. In so doing we are allowing each student to develop more fully. Repetition is out, progress is where the main emphasis lies.

The main weakness of mini courses is not exposing the student to the full range of special area classes. The question arises here as to what age is the appropriate age for specialization. We feel that after a general program in special area subjects from kindergarten through third grade the students are ready for specialization. By fourth grade we feel the pro's of mini courses far outweigh this con.

Mini courses also allow the teacher to control class size and ability levels within a class. This must be done on a cooperative basis among teachers offering the mini courses. If the art teacher offers candle-making, a class which must have fewer students due to

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supplies and the time it takes to melt wax, then other teachers of mini courses must be willing to offer large group activities to absorb the extra students from art. An example would be to offer candle-making along with field hockey, a team sport requiring more students to create full teams. This also allows a more varied program. Candle-making would be difficult to implement in a conventional special area schedule due to class size. Also, more classes can be offered due to the restriction concept.

Through registration the teacher can also control ability levels. In the schedule it is each teacher's responsibility to include courses of varying complexity. Then when registration day comes the teacher meets every student and sees what class they want to sign up for. If a child wants to sign up for a class that the teacher feels would be too advanced she can persuade the student to take a class more appropriate to the student's needs. Thus, when the classes meet, the teacher is assured of the ability level of the class. She will know exactly at what level to begin instruction.

Mini courses have also had a very real effect on the teachers. The first consideration and most noticeable effect is on preparation time. This time can be divided into three areas, schedule preparation, lesson preparation and material preparation.

Before the registration period for the students, the teachers must cooperatively prepare the schedules. It is the teacher's responsibility first off to establish what mini courses she will offer in order to give each student a wide latitude to choose from. The mini courses must be varied over the four nine week periods to offer new mini courses for the students to choose from, and also to offer mini courses of varying complexity. Then all the teachers of mini courses must meet to establish the most practical schedule. A schedule which would offer each student the maximum number of choices, which would group larger classes with small classes and which would intermix complexity level classes. To obtain a good schedule, meeting all the desired outcomes, is a time consuming and sometimes aggravating experience.

Once schedules are established, and registration completed, there are lesson plans to prepare. With more varied classes and varying

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degrees of complexity within classes, lesson planning becomes a more consuming activity. No longer can a teacher prepare lesson plans based on grade level. Each individual class is now an entity in itself, requiring individual planning. A teacher could have as many as ten mini courses meeting one to three times a week to prepare for, plus the primary classes.

Along with the more varied classes and varying degrees of complexity within the classes comes more time needed for material preparation. The art teacher may have candlemaking, requiring molds, wax, sand, wick, etc.; ceramics, requiring clay and glazing; jewelry, requiring the various metals; and oil painting, requiring canvas, brushes and the paint, in a day's schedule. With only a five minute break between classes it is the teacher's responsibility to make sure all materials are ready and useable before the day begins.

Offering mini courses does require much more time and planning of the special area teacher. Although after offering four semesters of mini course I doubt that you would hear any complaints from our special area teachers. Again, the pros far outweigh the cons.

Mini courses do offer a more exciting method to teaching. Each class is different, no longer must a teacher feel like a robot presenting lessons. Being able to offer more diversified and complex courses adds excitement to the program.

Along with the diversified courses comes the responsibility for the teacher to have a diversified subject matter mastery. She can not rely on old faithful lessons year after year. New courses must be added, the teacher must be able to present these courses.

The Viewpoint of a Parent

As a parent, I had never really taken time to actually analyze my reactions to this innovative program.

As parents we were asked to sit down with our child, look over the many selections and give advice, if we wished. At first you attempt to make the choice until you realize he, or she, is capable of doing his own thing and doing it well.

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Choosing approximately one-fourth of the year's subject matter does sound like a great deal even to parents that are eager for new experiences for their children. However, it is realy only six hours a week.

I have heard very few complaints this year regarding physical education, art and music courses. If there are any, they are of short duration as the course soon comes to an end. Also, the child himself seems to realize that what is disagreeable will end in a nine week period and in an allotted period of time it seems that more is accomplished in each course than if it stretched on for the entire year.

The sense of urgency to complete a project is very apparent to the child, as he realizes it must be completed in nine weeks and it seems that many more things are completed! Things appear to be worked out in greater detail. The time element therefore, is very important. There is a greater determination to finish in the allotted period of time.

How rewarding to a parent to have a child find at least one course in which he or she really excells. It is gratifying to see your child involved in something about which you, as a parent, can become informed. I have now learned how to hook a rug!

There was another side benefit from the new program which I certainly did not visualize. As my daughter was taking an Introduction to Jazz course, the entire family became more aware of jazz and, in fact, we spent an evening together (which is somewhat rare today) at a public discussion of the Beginning of Jazz complete with a live instrumental group. This, I am sure, we wouldn't have experienced had not our daughter been involved in that course at that time.

The Viewpoint of a Classroom Teacher

College type registration for third graders! My first reaction was skeptical. Although I was enthusiastic about the many different mini courses that were now being offered I seriously doubted that my third graders could handle this responsibility without a great deal of guidance. How wrong I was! I think the best way to demonstrate

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the effectiveness of this new system is to give a concrete description of our first registration period.

On the first day of registration I herded my class into the multi purpose room where registration tables had been set up. The scene looked like organized chaos. The special teachers were sitting at tables armed with pencils, registration sheets, etc. The other classes from my unit had already arrived and teachers were actively trying to ferret out territorial rights for their particular classes. My class and I found a corner of the room and established claim to it. I hovered uncertainly around my class making inane remarks such as "Do you have your schedule?" "Where is your pencil?" and asking for what must have been the 20th time "Have you made all your decisions and do you know where to go first?" My students answered politely enough but their attention was really riveted on the scheduling tables.

Then registration began! My third graders were allowed to register for their first choice first. I walked toward my group prepared to give yet another set of redundant instructions and suddenly found myself minus a class. They had all found the proper tables and were either actually registering or were standing in line waiting their turn. As registration continued classes began closing out. I noticed one boy in my class who had made it all the way to the head of a line for an especially favored course only to have the teacher announce that the class was closed. His face crumpled and I thought now its time for me to step in and help. I approached him armed with a series of consoling words and helpful hints. Before I could use any of my artillery his face suddenly brightened. He had spied a short line for his next choice and rushed over with a vengeance, his initial disappointment apparently forgotten.

Not all of the students got all of their choices but most got their first choice and were able to compromise on the second and third. My class and I walked back to our room very proud of ourselves and very satisfied.

From the first day of registration students had to develop decision making skills and to accept responsibility for their choices. These skills in many ways have carried over into the classroom. Here are just a few examples.

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For the past two years I have been giving my students work contracts in Reading, Science and Social Studies. I found this year that some of my students have been able to develop their own contracts by utilizing available materials in the classroom and school library. Often the student developed contracts required more work and were of a more complex nature than the ones I had drawn up. With a few exceptions the students followed through on their contracts. One student asked to be allowed to teach a lesson on the different kinds of soil found in our area. Her lesson went without a hitch complete with a filmstrip which she discussed effectively and charts and soil samples.

Enthusiasm is another by-product of mini course scheduling. Last year all of my students attended the same specials class. This meant that they all participated in the same activity. Now they go to five different activities and their experiences are enthusiastically shared. For example, four or five students will come back to class armed with puppets they have made in puppetry class. Other students will crowd around and the puppet making process is enthusiastically discussed. Even the teacher is taught how to make this special kind of puppet.

Because courses are not forced upon them, students are more willing to try areas that they may have actively rebelled against had they been arbitrarily assigned to them. A good example of this is that just as many boys as girls in my class signed up for the cooking course. It was a boy not a girl who volunteered to make his cooking class fudge for our first party. No one could have been prouder than he when he passed it out to the class.

Many of us are beginning to realize that students up to this point did not accept responsibility because they had little or no role in the decision making process. They felt they had no vested interest in the outcome. After all, up until now, it really wasn't their baby.

In short, the mini course program has provided benefits to many people in a variety of ways, none of which came about without hard work. The feeling among the staff, however, is that it was worth it.

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The special feature about this program is the fact that kids are making decisions at an early age and they're being guided to do so. What is so great is that the learning took place because of necessity and out of the design of the student's environment, not because it was a section of the curriculum.

We know this lesson will last!